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EARLY CLERICALS OF LOS ANGELES

BY H. D. BARROWS.

[Read before the Historical Society Dec. 2, 1901.]

As Alta California was settled by Spanish-speaking people who tolerated no other form of religion except the Roman Catholic, of course there were no churches except of that faith in Los Angeles, from the time of the settlement of the ancient pueblo, in the year 1781, until the change of government in 1846.

From and after the founding of the mission of San Gabriel, in 1778, until, and after the completion of the old Plaza church in the latter part of 1822, that mission became and remained the center of industrial activity, as well as the headquarters of clerical authority for this portion of the province.

Fathers Salvadea, Sanchez, Boscana and Esténega managed with zeal and great ability the extensive concerns, both spiritual and temporal, of the mission, sending a priest occasionally to the pueblo, or coming themselves, to say mass, at the capilla or chapel which had been erected north and west of the present church. After the latter was built, Father Boscana became the first regular rector or pastor, serving till 1831. He was succeeded by Fathers Martinas, Sanchez, Bachelot, Estenega, Jimenez, Ordaz, Rosales, etc., who served as local pastors, for longer or shorter periods, of the only church in the town, from 1831 to 1851.

The first priest, whom I knew of, but did not know personally, was Padre Anacleto Lestrade, a native of France, who was the incumbent from '51 to '56. Padre Blas Raho, who came here in 1856, I knew well, and esteemed highly. He was broad-minded and tolerant. He told me that he had lived sixteen years in the Mississippi valley before he came to Los Angeles. He was a native of Italy.

It was during his pastorate that the old church building was greatly improved. It was frescoed inside and out, by a Frenchman, Mr. H. Penelon, the pioneer photographer of Los Angeles. The lettering on the front of the building as seen to-day was done by Penelon, viz.: "Los Fieles de Esta Parroquia

A la Reina de Los Angeles, 1861;" and also on the marble tablets:

Dios Te Salve, Maria Llena De Gracia.

El Señor Esta En Su Santo Templo: Calle La Tierra ante su Acatamiento.

Habac. 2, 20.

Santa Maria Madre de Dios, Ruega por nosotros Pecadores.

Padre Raho was the first Vicar General of the diocese, under Bishop Amat.

Later, Padre Raho, who served his parish faithfully for a number of years, and who was respected and revered by his parishoners, fell sick and went to the Sisters' Hospital, which was then located in the large two-story brick building which stood, and I think still stands, to the east of the upper depot, and between the latter and the river, which the Sisters bought of Mr. H. C. Cardwell, who built it.

I visited Padre Raho here during his last illness, at his request. He told me that he had not a cent of money (having taken vows of poverty,) in the world; and that the good sisters furnished him refuge, etc. The venerable Sister Ann, whom many will remember, and who, I believe, is still living at an advanced age, at the home of the order of Sisters of Charity, at Emmettsburg, Pa., was at that time the superioress of the order here.

Fathers Duran and Mora succeeded Father Raho. There were other priests whom I did not know so well, who made their home at different times at the parsonage adjoining the old church. But none of these, so far as my acquaintance permitted me to know, with the possible exception of Father Mora, were as liberal as Father Raho. The bishop of the diocese during these times was Tadeo Amat, who, though his jurisdiction extended to Monterey, made his headquarters first for a time at Santa Barbara, and then at this old church of "Nuestra Señora, la Reyna de Los Angeles." Bishop Amat was succeeded by Bishop (formerly Father) Mora, a gentle and scholarly prelate. It was during the latter's administration (in 1874, I think,) that the cathedral (and bishop's residence) was built, on Main street, and the official headquarters of the diocese were removed thither. Bishop Mora was succeeded by Bishop Montgomery, the present head of the local church|.

When Father Mora was made bishop, Father Peter Verdager, who was a very eloquent Spanish orator, became pastor of the old church. "Father Peter," as he was widely known, was

made a bishop a few years ago, and he was succeeded by the present rector, a young and talented priest, Father Liébana. "Father Peter," now Bishop Verdaguer, presides over the diocese of Texas.

Bishop Mora, and genial, gentle Father Adam, long his Vicar General, and long an honored and active member of our Historical Society, both now reside with their relatives, in retreat, during the closing years of their lives, at Barcelona, Spain.

Of the early Protestant ministers who came to Los Angeles, I knew personally nearly all of them, as they were comparatively few in numbers; whilst of the many, many who now reside here, I hardly know one, intimately.

One of the first to come here, I think, was Parson Adam Bland, who had the reputation of being a smart preacher and a shrewd horse-trader. But I heard—how truly I know not—that after laboring here a year or two in the early '50's, he abandoned the field as hopeless, though in after years he came to the county again, when he found the gospel vineyard vastly more encouraging than during his former missionary labors. Where Parson Bland is now located, or whether he is still living, I do not know.

When I came here in '54, there was only one church building in town—that fronting the Plaza; and no regular Protestant church edifice at all.

Rev. James Woods, a Presbyterian, was holding protestant services then in the adobe that stood on the present site of the "People's Store;" and he came to me and asked me to assist in the music each Sunday, which I did. Just how long he preached here, I cannot now recall. But I remember that when the bodies of the four members of Sheriff Barton's party, who were killed in January, 1857, by the Juan Flores bandits, were brought here to town from San Juan for burial, there was no Protestant minister here then to conduct funeral services. But, as it happened, two of the murdered men were Masons, and that fraternal, semi-religious order, whose organization extends throughout the civilized world, in sheer pity, turned aside, after decorously and reverently burying their own two brethren, and read a portion of the Masonic burial service over the bodies of the other two men, who were not Masons. The alternative, which at that time was imminent, of dumping those two bruised, dumb human beings into the ground without any religious service whatever, seemed to me then, and has seemed to me since, a ghastly one.

Rev. J. W. Douglass, founder of the "Pacific" newspaper, who taught a private school in the family of Wm. Wolfskill in the forepart of 1854, was a minister, but I believe he never held public religious services here. A Dr. Carter, and also W. H. Shore, deputy county clerk, read the Episcopal service for brief periods during the late '50's; but with these exceptions, my impression is that there was no resident Protestant clergyman, or lay reader, who conducted religious services here from the time Rev. Mr. Woods left, sometime in 1855, till 1858, or '59, when Rev. Wm. E. Boardman, a Presbyterian clergyman, came here and held regular Sunday services, sometimes in one place and sometimes in another, until 1861 or '62, or until after the commencement of the Civil War, when he went east and entered the service of the "Christian Commission," an organization which did a noble work, similar to that done by the Red Cross Society in the late Spanish war.

Mr. Boardman was an able and eloquent preacher and writer, and the author of a popular book, entitled "The Higher Christian Life." The want of a commodious place of meeting, stimulated a movement to raise funds for the erection of a church building; and, as good Benjamin D. Wilson had donated a lot,—a portion of the hill on which the county court house now stands—to the "First Protestant Society," which should build a house of worship, people of various denominations, who, without regard to sect, attended Mr. Boardman's ministrations, formed an organization, under the name of "The First Protestant Society of Los Angeles," and erected the walls and roof of a church on the lot donated by Mr. Wilson. But this work came to a standstill after Mr. Boardman left; and not until the arrival of Rev. Mr. Birdsall, about Christmas, 1864, was any further progress made in the erection of "The First Protestant Church building in Los Angeles.

I do not pretend here to give a consecutive account of all the Protestant ministers who, a quarter of a century or more ago, helped to establish churches of the different denominations here, much less to connect them chronologically with the many churches of today; but rather to give some recollections of those of the former epoch, whom I knew well, either personally or by reputation.

Rev. J. H. Stump was a Methodist minister here in the '60's. Rev. A. M. Hough was another early preacher of the same denomination, who came in 1868, and who, with the exception of brief intervals, resided here till his death, in August, 1900. On

the establishment of the "Southern California Conference," Mr. Hough became the Presiding Elder. Revs. Mr. Hendon and Mr. Copeland were other local Methodist pastors of that period. It is said that Rev. J. W. Brier preached the first sermon ever preached in Los Angeles, in 1850; but I do not think he stayed here long, as there were neither Methodist worshippers nor a house of worship in Los Angeles at that early period.

Rev. A. M. Campbell, now deceased, was the pastor of the first "Methodist Church, South," established here in 1873. His widow, daughter of Judge B. L. Peel, is now a missionary in the peninsula of Corea.

Rev. Elias Birdsall, who came to Los Angeles in December, 1864, soon after his arrival organized an Episcopalian church, of which he was the rector for many years. I knew Mr. Birdsall very well, and learned to admire and respect him as one of the best men whom I ever knew. Although he was a zealous churchman, he was in all respects an admirable citizen. He was a logical thinker and a fine elocutionist. He believed—and most laymen will certainly agree with him—that every person who is to become a public speaker should make a special preparatory study of elocution.

At the funeral services of President Lincoln, held in this city, simultaneously with those held throughout the United States on the 19th of April, 1865, Mr. Birdsall delivered an admirable oration before a large concourse of our citizens. Mr. Birdsall died November 3, 1890.

Other rectors of the original Saint Athanasius Church of Los Angeles (afterwards changed to Saint Paul's) were Dr. J. J. Talbot, H. H. Messenger, C. F. Loop, Wm. H. Hill, J. B. Gray, G. W. Burton, and again, subsequent to 1880, Mr. Birdsall. Dr. Talbot, who came here in 1868, from Louisville, Ky., where he had had charge of a wealthy church at a salary of \$3,500 a year, was a very gifted and impassioned orator, and he had withal a slight tinge of the sentimental or poetical in his character, and his sermons were much admired, especially by the ladies. His published address on the occasion of the death of President Lincoln, delivered in the East before he came to Los Angeles, was considered one of the best of the many public orations delivered on that sorrowful theme. Dr. Talbot, sad to say, however, was only another instance of a man with brilliant talents who threw himself away and went to the bad. He lived, in the main, an exemplary life here, at least up to within a short time before he left.

To those who knew him intimately during his brief residence in Los Angeles, he used sometimes—I remember it well—to speak with tenderest regard of his dear children and his “wife, Betty,” in their pleasant home near Louisville. And to them, i. e., his friends here—his last words, uttered at the very threshold of death, as quoted by Major Ben. Truman in the “Alta California,” in 1884, are full of startling pathos and inexpressible sadness; indeed, I know of no sadder passage in all literature:

“I had children—beautiful, to me at least, as a dream of morning, and they had so entwined themselves around their father’s heart that no matter where he might wander, ever it came back to them on the wings of a father’s undying love. The destroyer took their hands in his and led them away. I had a wife whose charms of mind and person were such that to ‘see her was to remember; to know her, was to love.’ ‘I had a mother, . . . and while her boy raged in his wild delirium two thousand miles away, the pitying angels pushed the golden gates ajar, and the mother of the drunkard entered into rest. And thus I stand a clergyman without a church, a barrister without a brief or business, a husband without a wife, a son without a parent, a man with scarcely a friend, a soul without hope—all swallowed up in the maelstrom of drink!’”

It seems that Dr. Talbot, after he left here, went back east, and was put out of the ministry, became a lawyer, was again permitted to resume his clerical functions, again fell, and again was compelled to retire from his rectorship in 1879; shortly after which he died as above, with the above pathetic words on his lips.

Mr. Messenger, prior to his coming here, had been a missionary in Liberia, Africa. After his rectorship here, he, I think, founded the Episcopal church of San Gabriel.

Mr. Messenger was a jovial, optimistic, but withal a zealous servant of the church, possessing not a little of the missionary spirit. Afterwards he went to Arizona.

There are many old-timers still living who well remember Revs. Messrs. Loop, Hill and Gray. Mr. Loop, after serving the parish here for a considerable period, moved to Pomona, where he became a prominent, public-spirited citizen, and where he died a year or two ago. Mr. Hill moved from here to San Quentin, where, for some years, he was chaplain of the State Penitentiary, and where, I understood, he became totally blind. He died several years ago. Mr. Gray went from here to Ala-

bama. I know not if he is still living. Mr. Burton is still a resident of this city, where he has been for years connected with the daily and weekly press.

The early ministers of the Congregational church in Los Angeles were Revs. Alexander Parker, (1866-7); I. W. Atherton, (1867-'71); J. T. Wills, (1871-3); D. T. Packard, (1873-9); C. J. Hutchins, (1879-'82); and A. J. Wells, (1882-87).

The first church building, erected under the ministrations of Mr. Parker, was on New High street, north of Temple, a photograph of which I herewith present to the Historical Society.

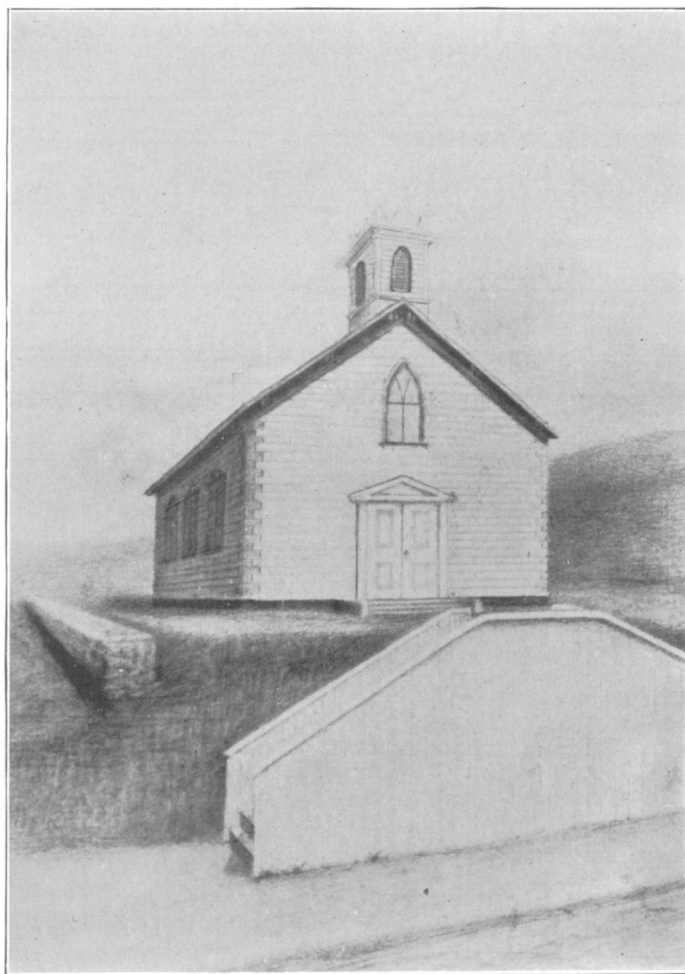
Early Baptist clergymen were Revs. Messrs. Hobbs, Zahn Fryer, Reed, etc., all of whom have deceased.

Rabbi A. W. Edelman organized the Hebrew congregation, B'nai B'rith, in 1862. Rabbi Edelman is still a citizen of Los Angeles.

I should mention that Drs. J. W. Ellis, A. F. White and W. J. Chichester were comparatively early pastors of the Presbyterian church; and also that Dr. M. M. Bovard was president of the University of Southern California.

Dr. Eli Fay was the first Unitarian minister to hold public religious services here. Dr. Fay was, intellectually, a very able man, though somewhat aggressive and self-assertive. His sermons, barring a rather rasping flavor of egotism, were models of powerful reasoning. Before coming to Los Angeles, Dr. Fay had been pastor of Unitarian congregations at Leominster, Mass., and at Sheffield, England. In addition to his sacerdotal qualifications, Dr. Fay was a very good judge of the value of real estate. Soon after he came here from Kansas City, he bought what he called "choice pieces of property," on which it was understood he afterwards made big money. Like many other shrewd saints who came here from many countries, his faith in Los Angeles real estate seemed to be only second to his faith in the realty of the land of Canaan, or, in other words, in "choice lots" in the "New Jerusalem."

I might recount many anecdotes concerning those ministers and priests of Los Angeles of a former generation, of whom I have spoken; for in those olden times, in this then small town, everybody knew almost everybody. In a frontier town,—which this then was,—there are always picturesque characters, among clericals as well as among laymen.



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

ERECTED IN 1868 ON NEW HIGH STREET, NORTH OF TEMPLE